

Musical Messages

The Housemartins' hit singles *Happy Hour* and *Caravan of Love* topped the charts last year. An all-male group in their early twenties, they are heavily influenced by the unusual combination of feminism and religion. But they sometimes have difficulty matching their theory to their practice, as Janie Glen found out when she talked to them in Hull.

How did you all first get together? Whose idea was it?

Paul It was mine and Stan's really. I advertised on a street window for busking partners. I was on the dole and Stan was the most suitable applicant. We went busking for a year writing our own songs and then mid 84 we decided to become a four piece.

Hugh I got involved in the band through Ted Key, an old mate of mine. He started playing bass with Paul and Stan and the three of them did a few gigs with one or two different drummers. Ted eventually got me into the

band.

You make a lot of coming from Hull. Why?

Paul We haven't made a big thing about *coming* from Hull, because we don't; but we have made a big thing about being based in Hull and forming in Hull.

Herman It started as a reaction to the press we got. One of the first things that people say to you as soon as you get a review in a paper is 'When are you going to move down to London?' It's a reaction to that. We don't want to go to London, we don't want to move.

Do you see yourselves as having a role in the local band scene?

Paul Not these days because we're never here. We aren't really involved.

What are your views on the music industry; how much control have you managed to maintain over what you do?

Stan We seem to have quite a lot of control. But there are times when you lose control purely because you can't do too many jobs at once.

That's the reason why we signed with Go Discs. They're very like ourselves, very amateurish in some respects. There's a little office run by a husband and wife. It

was our first record contract and, to date, our only record contract.

How do you think the music industry could be different?

Herman The money could be shared out a lot more equally. The difference between a successful band and a non-successful band is far larger than wage differences in any other industry.

How about democratising the industry, making it accountable to its young audience.

Paul Yes, definitely it should be made accountable. Young people should help decide the ticket prices, record prices, how much people get paid, the lot.

What do you think of Billy Bragg and Red Wedge?

Paul I think Billy Bragg is alright. He can write some good songs and politically he's on the right side of the fence. I don't know about Red Wedge. I'm not a fan of theirs.

Why not?

Stan They couldn't really come up with any policies. We wanted to get involved at first but then we talked to them and they had no manifesto. We were anxious not to put our name behind an organisation that had other



The Housemartins: bringing together sex, religion and politics

bands involved that said something completely different and might put us in a bad light. They didn't have a line.

Paul But we'll definitely tell people to vote Labour if there's an election.

Norman Some of the bands in Red Wedge didn't want to go on tour just before an election. They didn't want to say overtly 'vote Labour'. That seemed a bit wishy washy to us.

So what should happen with Red Wedge?

Paul You should open it up to people but I don't know how you can without saying certain things: you've got to lay down policies to the youth - that's what they need. It should be about a union of people who believe the same thing is right for the country. Who's going to decide what those things are?

Paul Those people, those artists must decide. I don't give a toss for all this social worker shit of, 'perhaps, the kids should decide'. The kids need guiding, they need definite policies put in front of them as an option, against the other side.

Hugh It can still be pluralistic, you can still have disagreements. But nevertheless as Paul says, there comes a point when you've got to say, we lay this before young people, this is our idea of what we think is the best way to go forward, are you with us or not?

What did you think of Band Aid and Bob Geldof?

Paul In many ways it was a really brilliant thing and I applaud it. But Ethiopia has given more to the West in interest on loans than we've given them in Band Aid, so it seems a bit pathetic. I don't question Bob Geldof's motives. It's good that he raised the subject, but he might have given a lot of people the impression that charity is the way out of Ethiopia's troubles.

Hugh It was quite special in its ignorance of the political situation. He had no criticisms of the government, he suggested it was non-political, he rubbed Africans' faces in the dirt when he invited Prince Charles along, somehow suggesting that

we're all involved in the struggle to eradicate poverty. He showed minus ten on the political scale. It did nothing for any insight into the problem and why it exists. In some ways, therefore, he helped us to step backwards towards some sort of Victorian ethic about curing the world's poverty.

What do you see as your role, now that you're media stars?

Stan Our role is to push left-wing politics and stop younger people from being led the wrong way. But when the papers, the news and the telly are all biased the other way, obviously we are fighting a losing battle.

But music is very influential. **Stan** I don't underestimate the power we might have because I was affected a lot by listening to people I respected as musicians and what they were saying. We do have a lot of power and it's up to us to use it to influence people the right way.

What about religion?

Hugh We would subscribe to the theory which says that Christ was one of society's first radicals. It's entirely possible that his murder in that sense was political. The Romans killed him to shut him up. And what happened to Christ and his ideas is what Lenin said happened to Marx, and what happens to a lot of radicals. After a certain time has elapsed after their deaths, if they haven't been able to stamp their ideas out, then the state begins to look for ways to take them over and make them safe.

Paul You get Mrs Thatcher, a few years ago, standing in the pulpit of a church and preaching that fighting inflation was a moral duty. How much more of a religious sanction do you want for the Tories? Or that nutty copper Anderton who said I'm doing God's work.'

Hugh, you used to be in the Workers' Revolutionary Party.

Hugh I did indeed but Stan would be the best person to tell you about it.

Stan I'd like to talk directly to some of the readers of *Marxism Today*, who I'm sure, like Hugh in the past, were totally brainless robots.

Basically Hugh was bored and wanted something to do with his brain and life, and he fell for marxism, which worked for him. He poured all his faith into that but it went sour because he suddenly found that what he believed in was in fact an idol with clay feet, and that that bloke Gerry Healy, at the head of it, was sexually harassing women. That disillusioned you totally, didn't it Hugh?

Hugh It made me reconsider the whole political thing. From that point on I turned to feminism and the women's movement.

How has your success affected your own lifestyles?

Stan Two of us have bought houses but they are modest houses that we could have bought quite easily. We've also deliberately kept ourselves down to what we think is a decent living wage.

Hugh We've given a lot of money to different charities and we've made a couple of donations to political causes. But in general what we've done is restrict ourselves to what we think is a decent wage, the sort anyone like an electrician could live on. How do you actually live? Do you all live on your own?

Paul Hugh lives with his mother down the road.

Has living with her got anything to do with convenience?

Hugh It's definitely convenient.

Does she wash your socks and cook your tea?

Hugh She does indeed. That's my big hypocritical area. Feminism's had an important influence on my ideas...but it doesn't always eradicate male hypocrisy. Until I leave home my lifestyle won't be consistent with my ideas.

Why do you have to move away from your mum before you can put them into practice?

Paul Because, with talking about it so much, he doesn't have time.

Hugh That's right.

Stan You see, Hugh's job really is to enlighten the rest of us about socialism. He is the original armchair socialist.

Has feminism affected the rest of you?

Paul I'd say we've been pretty backward on feminism. I've definitely been a scallywag, a bad lad, sleeping around.

So you think feminism is about controlling sexual desire?

Paul My behaviour wasn't as innocent as that. It came from a lack of respect for women and not connecting it with my politics. But, on the other hand, one of the reasons I now live by myself is because I believe I have to learn to do the housework. I've not been taught it and I've been having a pretty painful time. At the moment I'm not doing too bad.

Is it true that you wouldn't go



on Top of the Pops because they refused to have your mums on stage with you?

Herman It was exaggerated a bit. We were asked to go down to London to do exactly the same as the previous week, only better! We decided we wanted to make it a bit different and asked if we could do it with our mums. They said 'no'. So we refused to go.

What are you planning musically at the moment?

Stan We're going to record another album, get another single out and we're doing some more tours. Probably the sound of the music will change. We'll get some extra personnel in the band and try to make our music more definite. At the moment it's very sort of 'flash'. We'd like to put a bit more thought into it. That's it really. •